Nicholas II, Russia and Europe: 1905 and Russia's fate

Waldron, Peter

Leidschrift
Historisch Tijdschrift

Artikel/Article: Nicholas II, Russia and Europe: 1905 and Russia's fate
Auteur/Author: Peter Waldron
Verschenen in/Appeared in: *Leidschrift. Rusland en Europa. Westerse invloeden op Rusland* 24-2 (2009) 85-97

ISSN 0923-9146

Leidschrift is een zelfstandig wetenschappelijk historisch tijdschrift, verbonden aan het Instituut voor geschiedenis van de Universiteit Leiden. *Leidschrift* verschijnt drie maal per jaar in de vorm van een themanummer en biedt hiermee al ruim twintig jaar een podium voor levendige historiografische discussie.
Artikelen ouder dan 2 jaar zijn te downloaden van www.leidschrift.nl. Losse nummers kunnen per e-mail besteld worden. Het is ook mogelijk een jaarabonnement op *Leidschrift* te nemen. Zie www.leidschrift.nl voor meer informatie.

Leidschrift is an independent academic journal dealing with current historical debates and is linked to the Institute for History of Leiden University. *Leidschrift* appears tri-annually and each edition deals with a specific theme.
Articles older than two years can be downloaded from www.leidschrift.nl. Copies can be order by e-mail. It is also possible to order an yearly subscription. For more information visit www.leidschrift.nl.

Articles appearing in this journal are abstracted and indexed in *Historical Abstracts*.

Secretariaat/ Secretariat:
Doelensteeg 16
2311 VL Leiden
The Netherlands
071-5277205
redactie@leidschrift.nl
www.leidschrift.nl

Nicholas II, Russia and Europe: 1905 and Russia's fate

Peter Waldron

In 1905 Nicholas II faced a great crisis. Assailed from all sides by rebellion and confronted by military defeat in war with Japan, the response of the Tsarist regime to revolt and the humiliation of the failure of Russia's armed forces was crucial in determining the fate of the imperial Russian state. During 1905 Russia had to deal with the central dilemma that had faced Russia since the reign of Peter the Great: should the Russian state embrace European models, or could it modernise by pursuing its own unique pattern of political and social development? The proclamation of the 1905 October Manifesto was a turning point in the history of the Russian autocracy, as it appeared to demonstrate that Russia was to become a constitutional monarchy on the west European pattern, but Nicholas II was never able to reconcile himself to this new constitutional order.[1] He continued to believe that he remained the 'Autocrat of All the Russias', never accepting that his power had been diminished. This refusal to come to terms with reality was to colour the remainder of Nicholas's reign and contributed to the downfall of Tsarism in February 1917.

Nicholas II's grasp of domestic politics was shaky. Nicholas had been brought up to revere the ideal of autocracy and his father, the redoubtable Alexander III, had appeared as the personification of the concept. Alexander had moved sharply away from the reformist and more European-orientated policies of Alexander II after the Tsar-Liberator's assassination in 1881. Alexander III's instincts were to oppose reform and this was intensified by seeing his father murdered by terrorists: the result, so the new Tsar believed, of his father's reforming policies. The thirteen year old Nicholas witnessed the accession of his father to the throne in 1881 and saw at first hand how reform was swept from the agenda. Tutored by Pobedonostsev, the arch-conservative who advised Alexander III from his position as Chief Procurator of the Holy Synod, Nicholas was imbued with the highly traditional view of the nature of the Russian autocracy that was espoused by his father. His accession manifesto declared that 'Our grief cannot be expressed in words' and he felt unprepared for the business of

[1] The October Manifesto of 17 October 1905 established a legislative Duma and promised the enactment of fundamental civil liberties.

ruling the Russian Empire.[2] The new Tsar told Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich that 'I am not prepared to be a Tsar. I never wanted to become one. I know nothing of the business of ruling. I even have no idea how to talk to the ministers.'[3] In political terms, he wanted to continue the policies that his father had pursued which, in Nicholas's view, had brought stability to the empire. Indeed, Nicholas knew no other way of ruling.

The new Tsar was willing to be guided by his ministers, and this process functioned well for much of the 1890s as Russia's economy grew rapidly and Sergei Witte, the Minister of Finance, acted as the mainstay of government, subordinating other elements of the government machine to his economic priorities. Nicholas was able to learn something about the work of government and to gain an appreciation of the men who served him. This method of governing was, however, less effective when tensions arose about the most effective methods of ruling Russia. The resurgence of social discontent was brought into very sharp focus for Nicholas II in the summer of 1904. Within the space of six weeks, two of the Tsar's most devoted advisers were assassinated. In Finland, the much-loathed governor-general, V. I. Bobrikov, was murdered and in St Petersburg, the Minister of Internal Affairs, V. K. Pleve was killed by a terrorist bomb. Few people mourned either of these two men: Pleve was especially detested, even by his ministerial colleagues. Witte, cutting as ever, wrote that 'All you could hear was a sigh of relief and cursing of his memory'.[4] But the symbolism of these two assassinations was immense; they represented an assault on the foundations of autocracy and began to move the Russian government in the direction of Europe and reform.

This was most clearly personified with the appointment of P.D. Sviatopolk-Mirskii as Pleve's successor. The new Minister of Internal Affairs held opinions that were diametrically opposed to the reactionary Pleve. He saw himself as a '*zemstvo* man' who was steeped in the traditions of the liberal provincial nobility and believed that the Russian government must develop a relationship of trust with society.[5] Nicholas's motives in

[2] Polnoe sobranie zakonov rossiisskoi imperii (PSZ) [Complete collection of laws of the Russian Empire] XIV, no. 11014.

[3] Alexander Mikhailovich, *Once a Grand Duke* (New York 1932) 169.

[4] 'Perepiska S. Iu. Witte i A. N. Kuropatkina v 1904-1905 gg. [Correspondence of S.Iu. Witte and A.N. Kuropatkin in 1904-05]', *Krasnyi Arkhiv* [Red Archive] 19 (1926) 72.

[5] The zemstva were elected local councils, first established in the 1860s.

making this appointment are unclear. For some people, such as D.N. Shipov, a zemstvo activist, Sviatopolk-Mirskii's appointment to one of the most significant posts in the government was an unambiguous signal that Nicholas II had recognised the need for a fundamental shift in government policy. Others saw the appointment of the new minister as having little to do with the direction of policy, but instead as evidence of the influence of Nicholas II's mother, Mariia Fedorovna, who had a particular liking for Sviatopolk-Mirskii. It has been suggested that the Tsar did not actually comprehend the step that he was taking in making this appointment and that Nicholas was entirely ignorant of the new minister's opinions, simply seeing him as a decent and trustworthy individual.[6] The new minister lost no time in proposing radical reforms. Sviatopolk-Mirskii wanted to persuade Nicholas II of the need for some form of national representative body.

At the same time, Sviatopolk-Mirskii was becoming increasingly frustrated with the Tsar's vacillations and his reluctance to allow his ministers adequate autonomy. In November 1904, a national zemstvo congress had taken place without government permission and the Interior Minister had drafted a circular to instruct provincial governors to remind zemstvo chairmen of the prohibition on wider political debate by the zemstva. The Tsar commented unfavourably on the mild tone of the circular, and Sviatopolk-Mirskii immediately tendered his resignation, since he regarded this as demonstrating Nicholas's lack of trust in him. This provoked a serious rift between the Tsar and his Interior Minister: Nicholas refused to accept Sviatopolk-Mirskii's resignation and indeed noted in his diary that it made him 'very angry'.[7] In the end, however, Nicholas prevailed and Sviatopolk-Mirskii withdrew his resignation.[8] These events highlighted the fragility of the Interior Minister's position and the way in which the Emperor was able to exert his authority over his ministers: the absence of any real form of cabinet government meant that ministers found it difficult

[6] This is the view that Sviatopolk-Mirskii's wife took in her published diary and is supported by Andrew Verner. See: 'Dnevnik kn. Ekateriny Alekseevny Sviatopolk-Mirskoi za 1904-1905 gg. [Diary of Princess Ekaterina Alekseevna Svaitopolk-Mirkii for 1904-05]', *Istoricheskie zapiski* [Historical Notes] 77 (1965) 241-243., and A. Verner, *The crisis of Russian autocracy: Nicholas II and the 1905 Revolution* (Princeton 1990) 107-111.

[7] Moscow, Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF) [State Archive of the Russian Federation], f. 601, op. 1, d. 24, l. 8, 21 November 1904.

[8] Sviatopolk-Mirskaia, 'Dnevnik', 257-259.

to provide any concerted opposition to Nicholas. Personal meetings between the Tsar and individual ministers determined the policy of the government, and there was little regular coordination of government policy. The emperor represented almost the only point at which all the elements of Russian government met and the personality and interests of the emperor were crucial in determining the overall shape of policy. A powerful and dominant minister, such as Witte, could acquire a degree of influence over the whole course of the Russian government's work, but such men were rare and their temporary pre-eminence produced resentment and discontent among other ministers. Nicholas II also disliked the emergence of strong-willed ministers who challenged his views and, while he found it difficult to confront them directly, he was prepared to act to weaken their positions and continued to harbour his resentments even after a minister had resigned.

Early in December 1904, Nicholas II convened a meeting of his senior ministers and advisers to discuss Sviatopolk-Mirskii's proposals for reform and more generally to consider how to deal with the growing discontent that was being manifested across the empire. This gathering marked the beginning of the process of intense discussion that was to lead to the publication of the October Manifesto in the autumn of 1905 and set the pattern for the debates that were to take place. Nicholas demonstrated his uncertainty over the process from the very beginning. He originally decided to exclude both Konstantin Pobedonostsev and Witte from the conference, on the grounds that Pobedonostsev would have nothing new to say and that Witte was too vague in his opinions. However, Pobedonostsev was too skilled a bureaucrat to tolerate his exclusion from such a significant gathering and ensured that his presence was belatedly requested by the Tsar, while Sviatopolk-Mirskii insisted that Witte, as the pre-eminent figure in Russian government, could hardly be prevented from contributing to the meeting. Nicholas reluctantly agreed to Witte's presence.[9]

The group that convened at Tsarskoe Selo at the beginning of December was presented with Sviatopolk-Mirskii's proposals for a consultative assembly, and discussion quickly focused on the fundamental ideological questions that they raised. There was a powerful defence by Pobedonostsev of the principle of autocracy that lay at the heart of the Russian government, and Witte set out in stark terms the contradictions between autocracy and representation. This approach was highly effective in

[9] S.E. Kryzhanovskii, *Vospominaniia* [Reminiscences] (Berlin 1938) 25.

persuading Nicholas that he should oppose Sviatopolk-Mirskii's fundamental idea of introducing some form of representation into the Russian government. Nicholas was jealous of his own autocratic rights and was deeply resistant to make concessions that would erode his own authority. The spectre of a constitution that was raised by some of the participants in the December 1904 meeting was sufficient to persuade the emperor that he should oppose Sviatopolk-Mirskii's proposals. The edict that was issued on 12 December 1904 as a result of this meeting made no mention of elected representation.[10] This decision marked the effective end of Sviatopolk-Mirskii's tenure of office, but his final weeks in office were marked by significant disasters. On 19 December, the Japanese prevailed over Russia's chief base in the Far East and forced the surrender of Port Arthur. This was an event which profoundly affected Nicholas: unusually, he commented on a political matter in his diary, writing that:

> Grave and painful, even though it had been foreseen, but one wanted to believe that the army would relieve the fortress. The defenders are all heroes and did more than could have been suggested. But such is God's will.[11]

While this represented an unusual degree of emotion from the emperor, those closest to him commented on his apparent equanimity in the face of military catastrophe, with even his mother remarking on him being 'completely calm and content'.[12]

The second event to colour the end of Sviatopolk-Mirskii's period in office was Bloody Sunday. On 9 January 1905 several hundred workers taking part in peaceful demonstrations in St Petersburg were killed or wounded by troops firing on them, and this acted as the spark for movements to emerge in other cities of the empire.[13] Nicholas's reaction to the massacre was typically brief. He wrote in his diary that it was,

> A grave day! In Petersburg serious disorders took place as a result of the workers' desire to reach the Winter Palace. The troops were forced to fire in different parts of the city; there were many killed

[10] PSZ XXIV, no. 25495.
[11] GARF, op. 601, op.1, d. 248, 20 December 1904.
[12] Sviatopolk-Mirskaia, 'Dnevnik', 279.
[13] W. Sablinsky, *The road to Bloody Sunday. Father Gapon and the St Petersburg massacre of 1905* (Princeton 1976) 266-267.

and wounded. God, how painful and distressing.

The original demands which the demonstrators made were largely economic and related to their working and living conditions: better pay, shorter hours, the recognition of trade unions and the like.[14] Such demands appeared wholly reasonable to a large proportion of the Russian elite, including a section of the government, but the view that the regime espoused was that making any form of material concession to these demands would only demonstrate that the regime was powerless and open to further pressure. The favoured response of the emperor was to rely on the traditional ethos of the Russian autocracy: to assert that it held absolute power and could maintain itself by force. The reaction to the demands made by the marchers was a half-hearted effort to set up a commission to look into the grievances displayed by the workers, but it foundered over its terms of reference.

Nicholas's main concern was to reassert the authority of the autocracy: he appointed the former Moscow police chief, D.F. Trepov, as governor-general of St Petersburg. Trepov was renowned as a stalwart of the autocracy and had worked in Moscow alongside the Tsar's famously reactionary uncle, Grand Duke Sergei. At the same time, Nicholas finally accepted the resignation of Sviatopolk-Mirskii as Interior Minister, casting him aside without any token of appreciation for his work. His replacement was to be A.G. Bulygin, former governor of Kaluga and Grand Duke Sergei's deputy as Moscow governor-general. Bulygin had no particular political axe to grind, and under his tenure the Interior Ministry became dominated by Trepov and by P.N. Durnovo, a sophisticated proponent of repressive policies.[15] The refusal of the regime to meet what appeared to be legitimate demands with anything other than bullets and the full apparatus of oppression did not persuade the urban population that they should return to their previous quiescence and most of the large cities of the empire were plagued by strikes and demonstrations during 1905.

Trouble was not confined to the cities: the links between city and village in Russia were very strong, as most of the new working class maintained their ties with their home villages. News travelled quickly back to the countryside and the peasantry were well aware of the difficulties being endured by their counterparts in the factories. The war with Japan also affected the peasant as soldiers were sent off to fight in the Far East, and the catalogue of defeats and deaths put doubts into the peasant mind as

[14] A. Ascher, *The revolution of 1905: Russia in disarray I* (Stanford 1988) 87-89.
[15] D. Lieven, *Russia's rulers under the old regime* (London 1989) 213-215.

to the competence of the regime to take care of its population. These pressures came on top of the economic hardship which was already being felt in the countryside and they combined to produce outbreaks of revolt and disturbances in many parts of European Russia. Peasants refused to accept decisions of the land captains, 'landowners' houses were sacked and their crops destroyed, but although there were over 3,000 separate incidents reported during the year, they did not develop into any kind of mass uprising against the government on the lines of the great peasant revolts of earlier centuries.[16]

Nevertheless, these disturbances presented great problems for the government as they were concentrated into short periods of the year: most of the trouble took place in the spring, before sowing, and especially in the autumn, after the harvest was completed, so that the regime's military and police resources were stretched to the limits. This situation was exacerbated by the continued absence of many of Russia's crack troops in the Far East. Even though the war with Japan was over by mid-1905, it was difficult to transport troops back to European Russia with any speed along the still incomplete Trans-Siberian Railway.

As the regime showed itself completely unwilling to meet the early demands for economic change, calls for political reform became louder and, as revolt became more widespread, the number of demands for political change as a prerequisite for economic change grew substantially. The articulation of political demands was made most forcibly and coherently by members of Russia's educated elite who were able to voice their aspirations in ways which could not fail to be heard by the government. The main component of the programmes put forward by Russia's embryonic political parties was for a legislative assembly on the West European pattern, elected on a very wide franchise, which would ensure that the Tsar could never again act in an arbitrary and despotic manner. As 1905 progressed the consensus outside the regime became stronger, so that the establishment of such an assembly was essential.[17]

Inside the government, however, argument continued to rage about the wisdom of reform. The attitude of the emperor was crucial in determining the progress that reform could make. At the beginning of

[16] M. Perrie, 'The Russian peasant movement of 1905-7' in: B. Eklof and S.P. Frank ed., *The world of the Russian peasant: post-emancipation culture and society* (Boston, MA 1990) 196-198.

[17] Verner, *The crisis of Russian autocracy*, 218.

February, the Tsar and his advisers met again to discuss the best methods of tackling the unrest that gripped Russia. Nicholas had ordered the new Minister of the Interior to prepare a decree laying the way open for the creation of a consultative assembly but, to the astonishment of most ministers, the first official declaration that emerged on 18 February was a manifesto reasserting the authority of the Russian autocracy.[18] This was accompanied by a decree suggesting that the government would now take into consideration the views of individuals and organisations on legislation that was under discussion; a step towards the idea of a consultative assembly. Nicholas did not appear to recognise that these two declarations of government policy could be seen as contradictory and the emperor's inability to comprehend the inconsistencies in his approach created further difficulties for his ministers and for the Russian state.[19]

Discussions over the form that a consultative assembly would take occupied the first half of 1905. Bulygin had gained Nicholas's approval to draft proposals without needing to take account of any views from outside the government. The documents that the Interior Minister presented for discussion in May 1905 proposed the establishment of a consultative State Duma that would scrutinise legislative proposals before they were formally discussed by the State Council. The new Duma was to be elected, but the franchise was to be based on property qualifications, thus severely limiting representation from the peasantry. Nicholas was deeply sceptical of anything that could be construed as placing limitations on his autocratic power, and he insisted that the new institution's role should be confined to providing advice on legislative proposals. He wanted the Duma excluded from any part in the real work of government. In particular, the emperor insisted that he must retain the final say in determining the content of legislation and he rejected Bulygin's proposal that legislation rejected by the Duma and State Council would be returned to ministers for their consideration. Nicholas wanted to retain his traditional role as the final judge of how Russia was governed.[20] A further meeting took place at Peterhof in July to discuss Bulygin's plans. Attended by ministers and members of the imperial family, together with a number of members of the existing State Council, the discussion centred on the abstruse point that the

[18] PSZ XXV, no. 776.
[19] V.I. Gurko, *Figures and features of the past: government and opinion in the reign of Nicholas II* (Stanford 1939) 371-372.
[20] Verner, *Crisis*, 200-201.

emperor had identified: should the Tsar have the right to approve legislation that both Duma and State Council had rejected? This ran to the core of the process of reform: should the emperor's power be limited in any way, or could the Tsar retain the prerogative to put any legislation into force, no matter whether the formal legislative institutions had approved it or not? Nicholas's confusion and inconsistency came to the fore, when he agreed to side with the majority and conceded that, even though this was to be a consultative assembly, he would have to limit his powers and to abide by the decisions of Duma and State Council if they voted down legislation.[21] Even when the deliberations of the conference were concluded, the emperor continued to harbour doubts about the necessity of conceding a consultative assembly. Nicholas contemplated asking Bulygin to review the whole project again, and was prepared to delay the implementation of the new assembly for a further year.

The offer of this purely consultative assembly was inadequate and failed to satisfy the pressures which had built up during the early part of 1905. Disappointment with the concept of a consultative Duma was fuelled by detailed analysis of the cumbersome and complex electoral system that had been constructed. Elections were to be indirect and some sections of the population, such as industrial workers, were totally excluded from the suffrage. Discontent in both city and countryside continued to assail the regime. Strikes and rural discontent were accompanied by demonstrations in schools and universities. Meeting of all types of organisations took on a political character as groups as disparate as Old Believers and Kiev psychiatrists used their normal gatherings to voice political aspirations. It was plain that, far from dampening down political discussion, the proclamation of the Bulygin Duma had served to intensify pressure for change. The fact that the government had shown itself prepared to make some concessions seemed to demonstrate to society that, if further pressure was exerted, more concessions would be forthcoming. By the early autumn of 1905 it was obvious to much of the Russian elite that unless fundamental reforms were made to the institutional structure of the state, there was a serious possibility that the combined weight of urban and rural revolt would succeed in toppling the Tsarist regime.[22] An already difficult situation was made much worse in the early autumn as a series of strikes gripped

[21] Materialy po uchrezhedniiu gosudarstevnnoi dumy [Materials on the foundation of the State Duma] (St Petersburg 1905) 21-23.
[22] A. Ascher, *The Revolution of 1905. Russia in disarray* (Stanford 1988) 223-224.

St Petersburg and Moscow. It was not just industry that was affected: in the capital, telegraph operators, civil servants, shop staff and hospital employees all stopped working. Even staff at the State Bank voted to take strike action. By mid-October, Moscow had no electricity or gas supply, most shops were shut and water was available for only a few hours a day. This was the most serious crisis to hit the Russian regime and its gravity was plain even to the emperor. Nicholas wrote to his mother that

> the terrible quiet days began, quiet indeed because there was complete order in the streets, but everybody knew that something was being prepared - the troops were awaiting the signal...it was the same feeling as in summer before a thunderstorm.[23]

It was evident that the concession of a consultative Duma had done nothing to quell discontent. More radical measures had to be contemplated. The Tsar was still not convinced that further reform was the best way to proceed. During the first half of October 1905, Nicholas considered the establishment of some form of military rule over the empire. He consulted with his senior military advisers about the practicality of taking such a drastic step, but their advice was unanimously against such a course of action, and even Trepov, the St Petersburg governor-general, recognised that reform was the only option open to the Tsarist regime. The complete lack of support amongst Nicholas's closest advisers, for a policy of meeting the revolution with force, made up Nicholas's mind. He wrote to Trepov on 16 October to thank him for his advice:

> It significantly eased the difficulty of making a final decision on the question of entering on the path of very broad reforms.( )Yes, Russia is being granted a constitution. There were not many of us who fought against it. But support in this struggle was to be found nowhere, every day an ever-larger number of people turned away from us, and in the end the inevitable happened.[24]

The prime mover in pushing for fundamental reform was Sergei Witte. Freshly returned from his successful negotiation of a peace treaty with the Japanese, he was the man of the moment in the autumn of 1905. His

[23] 'Perepiska Nikolaia II i Mariia Fedorovny' [Correspondence of Nicholas II and Mariia Fedorovna], *Krasnyi Arkhiv* [Red Archive] 22 (1927) 169.
[24] Verner, *Crisis*, 238.

already impressive authority, acquired from his long and distinguished tenure of the Finance Ministry, was enormously enhanced by the way in which he had proved able to extricate Russia from this humiliating war. Witte, motivated as much by his own self-interest as by concern for the Russian state and its emperor, proposed to the Tsar a series of measures designed to satisfy as many of the demands for political change as possible without damaging the essential structure of the autocracy. Witte hoped that by establishing a full legislative assembly and by making promises to observe fundamental civil freedoms, the most vociferous and articulate of the critics of the regime would be appeased and would divert their energies into the new institutions and away from opposing the government.

During October 1905, Witte worked hard to persuade the Tsar and his advisers that the only way forward was that of reform. His arguments were accepted by the middle of the month and, on 17 October 1905, resulted in the issuing of the October Manifesto, establishing a legislative Duma to take part in the work of governing Russia. This manifesto clearly signalled that the Russian autocracy had taken an irreversible step in allowing its subjects, for the first time, a formal say in the way in which the country was governed. The implications of this measure were wide-ranging and far from fully understood by the majority of those inside the regime who were to have to implement the new system. By giving the population of the Russian empire a permanent say in the way in which the country was governed, the state was ensuring that reform could never again disappear from the political agenda. [25]

The October Manifesto, however, showed signs of the tensions within the autocratic regime. It was formally entitled 'On the improvement of order in the state' and at the same time as it embraced the language of rights and representation, it stressed that the state would act to deal with outbreaks of disorder. The manifesto maintained an equivocal position, but the presence of elected representatives of the population meant that the regime could no longer easily impose its will on its subjects. By giving the population a formal place in government, the population of the empire would come to expect that its views would be taken into account and would not expect the government to act in direct opposition to its interests. At the

[25] V.I. Startsev, *Russakaia burzhuaziia i samoderzhavie v 1905-1917 (Bor'ba vokrug "otvetstvennogo ministerstva" i "pravitel'stva doveriia")* [The Russian bourgeoisie and autocracy in 1905-1917 (The struggle around a 'responsible ministry' and "a government of trust')] (Leningrad 1977) 46-47.

same time, and in a move that was motivated by Witte's own concerns as much as by anything else, the Council of Ministers was restructured to provide proper cabinet government, with Witte, unsurprisingly, taking up its chairmanship and acting as Russia's first prime minister. Witte did not endear himself to Nicholas II by acting as the prime mover in the preparation of the October Manifesto and in the establishment of a 'united' government. The emperor's account of the events of mid-October to his mother showed very clearly how he felt that he had been pushed into making concessions, and that he was not reconciled to the establishment of a legislative Duma. 'There was no other way left than to cross myself and to grant what everybody was asking for' wrote the Tsar on 19 October.[26]

The October Manifesto and the reform of the Council of Ministers represented the nadir of Nicholas II's power. The emperor believed that he had been forced into making changes to the legislative structures of the Russian empire by ministers who had betrayed the essence of the Russian autocracy. He harboured a dislike for Witte that would endure until Witte's death in 1915. Nicholas was never properly convinced of the need for reform, viewing it as a necessary evil and failing to understand that a reduction in his own autocratic power was both vital and irreversible. After 1905, once a semblance of order had been restored to the empire, he sought to claw back the concessions that had been made by restricting the powers of the Duma and by taking steps to hedge the Duma about with limitations on its power with the reform of the State Council as the second legislative chamber. Nicholas II, for all his connections with the royal houses of Europe, had failed to learn the lessons of their history. He clung to the belief that Russia was exceptional and that it required a unique form of government, immune from the pressures that had forced the retreat of monarchical powers elsewhere in Europe.

Nicholas looked to the past for his inspiration: the images of the monarchy that he selected for the 1913 Romanov tercentenary were from the seventeenth century.[27] The last Russian Tsar, well-intentioned and with a deep sense of his own duty, was an essentially limited individual. He proved unable to provide leadership during 1905, instead being buffeted this way and that by his advisers. Unable to move towards the logical conclusion of his own favoured approach and to establish a military

[26] 'Perepiska Nikolaia II', *Krasnyi Arkhiv* 22 (1927) 169.

[27] Richard Wortman, *Scenarios of power: myth and ceremony in Russian monarchy,* II (Princeton 2000) 445-447.

dictatorship in Russia, yet fundamentally unwilling to embrace reform, Nicholas II's behaviour during 1905 demonstrated his essential weakness, as both a ruler and as an individual, and presaged his overthrow a dozen years later.